

Proper 18 Year A 2020

'So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the House of Israel'. God is speaking to Ezekiel, who has written down the conversation for us. I think it rather sad that in the whole of our three year cycle of readings for the communion service, Ezekiel only appears ten times. Do any of you know anything about him, or his writings? If you do, I expect it is 'dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones'. We get that reading every year at the Easter vigil. But there is a lot more to Ezekiel than his vision of the Valley of Bones, important as it is. Forty eight chapters of classic priestly concerns (he was a priest as well as a prophet) - concerns about purity and holiness, and also about prophetic issues - righteousness and religious propriety. I do wish that Christians would pay a lot more attention to the Old Testament than seems to be the norm; these writings are the root out of which the New Testament blossomed. The Book of Ezekiel is made up of four sections; Chs 1-24 oracles concerning Judah, chs 25-32 oracles concerning foreign nations, chs 33-39 discourses about restoration and chs 40-48 visions of the new Temple. The writings, much of it biography, date from 593-571BC, so include the pivotal year of 587BC when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonian

army. Ezekiel was already an exile in Babylon - he had been there as a captive for ten years - and from Babylon he had pronounced judgement on the people of Israel for abandoning the covenant. After the fall of Jerusalem his tone changes, and he offers words of consolation and restoration. In today's reading we have Ezekiel described by God as a sentinel - an instrument of warning to the people. It is his job to warn to people of the dangers ahead, so that they can turn from their sin and live. If they do not, they will die. If he does not warn them, he will be responsible and he will die. But Ezekiel doesn't just talk to the people about God, he also talks to God about the people - he is on both sides. Into what seems a hopeless situation for the exiles in Babylon, the word of the Lord comes - a glimmer of hope - look at verse 11 - 'Why will you die, O House of Israel?' The text ends with this question - 'Why will you die?' God delights in the return of the prodigal, in the prayers of tax collectors, in the hospitality of the self-righteous, in the wandering sheep recovered and returned. Here in Ezekiel's prophecy we find God wanting to embrace human beings, to show them what is good, to enjoy them for ever. Why dwell in the land of the dead when life is spread out before you? Why live in an exile of guilt when there

is always a chance to begin again? God offers us the option of choosing life, and, amazingly, it seems that our choice matters to God - he wants us to choose life. Isn't that wonderful? We matter to God.

So 600 years after Ezekiel, Matthew is saying the same things to his church in Antioch Just as Ezekiel was responsible for warning the people of danger ahead, members of the church are responsible, Matthew tells us, for warning other members of the community when they are doing things contrary to the calling as followers of Christ.

This is a very difficult Gospel reading for us. Disagreement is difficult, but reconciliation seems to be doubly difficult and yet, in our heart of hearts, we know that refusal to be reconciled can only make things worse; harden old divisions, make new ones.

In the Gospel reading Jesus is talking at a very personal level, a level which will affect us in our own lives. His advice is practical and ruthlessly idealistic. When there is a dispute, a falling out, a misunderstanding, it is so much easier to paper over the cracks, carry on as normal (for the sake of the church) and carry on seething underneath - or we can pretend that there is nothing amiss, but avoid the person who has upset you - which does

nothing to solve the problem. To admit that you have done something wrong or to graciously accept an apology, requires humility - and we are not very good at that. Some people actually enjoy being offended - they go over and over the offence, until it begins to eat away inside them - my mother was an expert. Robbie Burns calls it 'nursing your wrath to keep it warm'. William Blake put it like this -

The Poison Tree I was angry with my friend;
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I water'd it in fears,
Night & morning with my tears:
And I sunned it with smiles,
And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night.
Till it bore an apple bright.
And my foe beheld it shine,
And he knew that it was mine.

And into my garden stole,
When the night had veil'd the pole;
In the morning glad I see;

My foe outstretched beneath the tree.

'I was angry with my friend ...That is what refusal to be reconciled brings about - the death of a relationship - one which could have been healed and then flourished. And you will note that Jesus says that it is the person on the receiving end of the wrong doing who should make the first move. Go and have it out with him because we don't want the bond of brotherhood in the Christian community threatened in this way.

But we all know how hard it is to say sorry; to admit I was in the wrong, apologise, make amends - pride, the ego, self at its worse, and everything becomes very defensive. The shutters come down - 'I'm not going to apologise to her'. It is bad enough being accused of something when you are in the right - but when you were in the wrong - well, that is twice as hard because you have to admit to yourself that you were in the wrong, before you can admit it to someone else, and none of us like to be in the wrong. At best, we find some excuse for having offended - 'it wasn't my fault, really - I didn't mean to upset her, I got hold of the wrong end of the stick'. You know how it is, we have all done it. We can say to God, in the *General Confession* 'we are truly sorry -

forgive us', but somehow we can't say it to each other. 'I'm not going to apologise. I was right'. But, as the Jewish writer Yehuda Amichai puts it, *From the place where we are right ...* ' by Yehuda Amichai

From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.

The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.

But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plough.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined
House once stood.

Saying sorry, building bridges, being reconciled, putting things right in the House of God – 'Love your neighbour as yourself – love is the fulfilling of the Law'.